

Rosa Luxemburg, The Mass Strike, 1906

Published in 1906 as *The Mass Strike, the Political Party and the Trade Unions*

Contents:

- 1. The Russian Revolution, Anarchism and the General Strike (page 1)**
- 2. The Mass Strike, A Historical and Not an Artificial Product (page 4)**
- 3. Development of the Mass Strike Movement in Russia (not included)*
- 4. The Interaction of the Political and the Economic Struggle (not included)*
- 5. Lessons of the Working-Class Movement in Russia Applicable to Germany (not included)*
- 6. Co-operation of Organised and Unorganised Workers Necessary for Victory (page 8)**
- 7. The Role of the Mass Strike in the Revolution (page 12)**
- 8. Need for United Action of Trade Unions and Social Democracy (page 18)**

The whole book is at: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1906/mass-strike/index.htm>

1. The Russian Revolution, Anarchism and the General Strike

Almost all works and pronouncement of international socialism on the subject of the mass strike date from the time before the Russian Revolution [of 1905], the first historical experience on a very large scale with the means of struggle. It is therefore evident that they are, for the most part, out-of-date. Their standpoint is essentially that of Engels who in 1873 wrote as follows in his criticism of the revolutionary blundering of the Bakuninist in Spain:

"The general strike, in the Bakuninists' program, is the lever which will be used for introducing the social revolution. One fine morning all the workers in every industry in a country, or perhaps in every country, will cease work, and thereby compel the ruling class either to submit in about four weeks, or to launch an attack on the workers so that the latter will have the right to defend themselves, and may use the opportunity to overthrow the old society. The proposal is by no means new: French and Belgian socialists have paraded it continually since 1848, but for all that is of English origin. During the rapid and powerful development of Chartism among the English workers that followed the crisis of 1837, the 'holy month'—a suspension of work on a national scale—was preached as early as 1839, and was received with such favour that in July 1842 the factory workers of the north of England attempted to carry it out. And at the Congress of the Allancists at Geneva on September 1, 1873, the general strike played a great part, but it was admitted on all sides to carry it out it was necessary to have a perfect organisation of the working-class and a full war chest. And that is the crux of the question. On the one hand, the governments, especially if they are encouraged by the workers' abstention from political action,

will never allow the funds of the workers to become large enough, and on the other hand, political events and the encroachments of the ruling class will bring about the liberation of the workers long before the proletariat gets the length of forming this ideal organisation and this colossal reserve fund. But if they had these, they would not need to make use of the roundabout way of the general strike in order to attain their object."

Here we have the reasoning that was characteristic of the attitude of international social democracy towards the mass strike in the following decades. It is based on the anarchist theory of the general strike—that is, the theory of the general strike as a means of inaugurating the social revolution, in contradistinction to the daily political struggle of the working-class—and exhausts itself in the following simple dilemma: either the proletariat as a whole are not yet in possession of the powerful organisation and financial resources required, in which case they cannot carry through the general strike; or they are already sufficiently well organised, in which case they do not need the general strike. This reasoning is so simple and at first glance so irrefutable that, for a quarter of a century, it has rendered excellent service to the modern labour movement as a logical weapon against the anarchist phantom and as a means of carrying out the idea of political struggle to the widest circles of the workers. The enormous strides taken by the labour movement in all capitalist countries during the last twenty-five years are the most convincing evidence of the value of the tactics of political struggle, which were insisted upon by Marx and Engels in opposition to Bakuninism and German social democracy, in its position of vanguard of the entire international labour movement is not in the least the direct product of the consistent and energetic application of these tactics.

The [1905] Russian Revolution has now effected a radical revision of the above piece of reasoning. For the first time in the history of the class struggle it has achieved a grandiose realisation of the idea of the mass strike and—as we shall discuss later—has even matured the general strike and thereby opened a new epoch in the development of the labour movement. It does not, of course, follow from this that the tactics of political struggle recommended by Marx and Engels were false or that criticism applied by them to anarchism was incorrect. On the contrary, it is the same train of ideas, the same method, the Engels-Marxian tactics, which lay at the foundation of the previous practice of the German social democracy, which now in the Russian Revolution are producing new factors and new conditions in the class struggle. The Russian Revolution, which is the first historical experiment on the model of the class strike, not merely does not afford a vindication of anarchism, but actually means *the historical liquidation of anarchism*. The sorry existence to which this mental tendency was condemned in recent decades by the powerful development of social democracy in Germany may, to a certain extent, be explained by the exclusive domination and long duration of the parliamentary period. A tendency patterned entirely upon the "first blow" and "direct action," a tendency

"revolutionary" in the most naked pitchfork sense, can only temporarily languish in the calm of parliamentary day and, on a return of the period of direct open struggle, can come to life again and unfold its inherent strength.

Russia, in particular, appeared to have become the experimental field for the heroic deeds of anarchism. A country in which the proletariat had absolutely no political rights and extremely weak organisations, a many-coloured complex of various sections of the population, a chaos of conflicting interests, a low standard of education amongst the masses of the people, extreme brutality in the use of violence on the part of the prevailing regime—all this seemed as if created to raise anarchism to a sudden if perhaps short-lived power. And finally, Russia was the historical birthplace of anarchism. But the fatherland of Bakunin was to become the burial-place of his teachings. Not only did and do the anarchists in Russia not stand at the head of the mass strike movement; not only does the whole political leadership of revolutionary action and also of the mass strike lie in the hands of the social democratic organisations, which are bitterly opposed as "bourgeois parties" by Russian anarchists, or partly in the hands of such socialist organisations as are more or less influenced by the social democracy and more or less approximate to it—such as the terrorist party, the "socialist revolutionaries"—but the anarchists simply do not exist as a serious political tendency in the Russian Revolution. Only in a small Lithuanian town with particularly difficult conditions—a confused medley of different nationalities among the workers, an extremely scattered condition of small-scale industry, a very severely oppressed proletariat—in Bialystok, there is, amongst the seven or eight different revolutionary groups a handful of half-grown "anarchists" who promote confusion and bewilderment amongst the workers to the best of their ability; and lastly in Moscow, and perhaps in two or three other towns, a handful of people of this kidney make themselves noticeable.

But apart from these few "revolutionary" groups, what is the actual role of anarchism in the Russian Revolution? It has become the sign of the common thief and plunderer; a large proportion of the innumerable thefts and acts of plunder of private persons are carried out under the name of "anarchist-communism"—acts which rise up like a troubled wave against the revolution in every period of depression and in every period of temporary defensive. Anarchism has become in the Russian Revolution, not the theory of the struggling proletariat, but the ideological signboard of the counterrevolutionary lumpenproletariat, who, like a school of sharks, swarm in the wake of the battleship of the revolution. And therewith the historical career of anarchism is well-nigh ended.

On the other hand, the mass strike in Russia has been realised not as means of evading the political struggle of the working-class, and especially of parliamentarism, not as a means of jumping suddenly into the social revolution by means of a theatrical coup, but as a means, firstly, of creating for the proletariat the

conditions of the daily political struggle and especially of parliamentarism. The revolutionary struggle in Russia, in which mass strikes are the most important weapon, is, by the working people, and above all by the proletariat, conducted for those political rights and conditions whose necessity and importance in the struggle for the emancipation of the working-class Marx and Engels first pointed out, and in opposition to anarchism fought for with all their might in the International. Thus has historical dialectics, the rock on which the whole teaching of Marxian socialism rests, brought it about that today anarchism, with which the idea of the mass strike is indissolubly associated, has itself come to be opposed to the mass strike which was combated as the opposite of the political activity of the proletariat, appears today as the most powerful weapon of the struggle for political rights. If, therefore, the Russian Revolution makes imperative a fundamental revision of the old standpoint of Marxism on the question of the mass strike, it is once again Marxism whose general method and points of view have thereby, in new form, carried off the prize. The Moor's beloved can die only by the hand of the Moor.

2. The Mass Strike, A Historical and Not an Artificial Product

The first revision of the question of the mass strike which results from the experience of Russia relates to the general conception of the problem. Till the present time the zealous advocates of an "attempt with the mass strike" in Germany of the stamp of Bernstein, Eisner, etc., and also the strongest opponents of such an attempt as represented in the trade-union camp by, for example, Bombelburg, stand when all is said and done, on the same conception, and that is the anarchist one. The apparent polar opposites do not mutually exclude each other but, as always, condition, and at the same time, supplement each other. For the anarchist mode of thought is direct speculation on the "great *Kladderadatsch*," on the social revolution merely as an external and inessential characteristic. According to it, what is essential is the whole abstract, unhistorical view of the mass strike and of all the conditions of the proletariat struggle generally.

For the anarchist there exist only two things as material suppositions of his "revolutionary" speculations—first, imagination, and second goodwill and courage to rescue humanity from the existing capitalist vale of tears. This fanciful mode of reasoning sixty years ago gave the result that the mass strike was the shortest, surest and easiest means of springing into the better social future. The same mode of reasoning recently gave the result that the trade-union struggle was the only real "direct action of the masses" and also the only real revolutionary struggle—which, as is well known, is the latest notion of the French and Italian "syndicalists." The fatal thing for anarchism has always been that the methods of struggle improvised in the

air were not only a reckoning without their host, that is, they were purely utopian, but that they, while not reckoning in the least with the despised evil reality, unexpectedly became in this evil reality, practical helps to the reaction, where previously they had only been, for the most part, revolutionary speculations.

On the same ground of abstract, unhistorical methods of observation stand those today who would, in the manner of a board of directors, put the mass strike in Germany on the calendar on an appointed day, and those who, like the participants in the trade-union congress at Cologne, would by a prohibition of "propaganda" eliminate the problem of the mass strike from the face of the earth. Both tendencies proceed on the common purely anarchistic assumption that the mass strike is a purely technical means of struggle which can be "decided" at the pleasure and strictly according to conscience, or "forbidden"—a kind of pocket-knife which can be kept in the pocket clasped "ready for any emergency," and according to the decision, can be unclasped and used. The opponents of the mass strike do indeed claim for themselves the merit of taking into consideration the historical groundwork and the material conditions of the present conditions in Germany in opposition to the "revolutionary romanticists" who hover in the air, and do not at any point reckon with the hard realities and the possibilities and impossibilities. "Facts and figures; figures and facts!" they cry, like Mr. Gradgrind in Dickens' *Hard Times*.

What the trade-union opponent of the mass strike understands by the "historical basis" and "material conditions" is two things—on the one hand the weakness of the proletariat, and on the other hand, the strength of Prussian-German militarism. The inadequate organisation of the workers and the imposing Prussian bayonet—these are the facts and figures upon which these trade-union leaders base their practical policy in the given case. Now when it is quite true that the trade-union cash box and the Prussian bayonet are material and very historical phenomena, but the conception based upon them is not historical materialism in Marx's sense but a policemanlike materialism in the sense of Puttkammer. The representatives of the capitalist police state reckon on much, and indeed, exclusively, with the occasional real power of the organised proletariat as well as with the material might of the bayonet, and from the comparative example of these two rows of figures the comforting conclusion is always drawn that the revolutionary labour movement is produced by individual demagogues and agitators; and that therefore there is in the prisons and bayonets an adequate means of subduing the unpleasant "passing phenomena."

The class-conscious German workers have at last grasped the humour of the policemanlike theory that the whole modern labour movement is an artificial, arbitrary product of a handful of conscienceless "demagogues and agitators."

It is exactly the same conception, however, that finds expression when two or three worthy comrades unite in a voluntary column of night-watchmen in order to warn the German working-class against the dangerous agitation of a few "revolutionary romanticists" and their "propaganda of the mass strike"; or, when on the other side, a noisy indignation campaign is engineered by those who, by means of "confidential" agreements between the executive of the party and the general commission of the trade unions, believe they can prevent the outbreak of the mass strike in Germany.

If it depended on the inflammatory "propaganda" of revolutionary romanticists or on confidential or public decisions of the party direction, then we should not even yet have had in Russia a single serious mass strike. In no country in the world—as I pointed out in March 1905 in the *Sachische Arbetierzeitung*—was the mass strike so little "propagated" or even "discussed" as in Russia. And the isolated examples of decisions and agreements of the Russian party executive which really sought to proclaim the mass strike of their own accord—as, for example, the last attempt in August of this year after the dissolution of the Duma—are almost valueless.

If, therefore, the Russian Revolution teaches us anything, it teaches above all that the mass strike is not artificially "made," not "decided" at random, not "propagated," but that it is a historical phenomenon which, at a given moment, results from social conditions with historical inevitability. It is not, therefore, by abstract speculations on the possibility or impossibility, the utility or the injuriousness of the mass strike, but only by an examination of those factors and social conditions out of which the mass strike grows in the present phase of the class struggle—in other words, it is not by *subjective criticism* of the mass strike from the standpoint of what is desirable, but only by *objective investigation* of the sources of the mass strike from the standpoint of what is historically inevitable, that the problem can be grasped or even discussed.

In the unreal sphere of abstract logical analysis it can be shown with exactly the same force on either side that the mass strike is absolutely impossible and sure to be defeated, and that it is possible and that its triumph cannot be questioned. And therefore the value of the evidence led on each side is exactly the same—and that is nil. Therefore, the fear of the "propagation" of the mass strike, which has even led to formal anathemas against the persons alleged to be guilty of this crime, is solely the product of the droll confusion of persons. It is just as impossible to "propagate" the mass strike as an abstract means of struggle as it is to propagate the "revolution." "Revolution" like "mass strike" signifies nothing but an external form of the class struggle, which can have sense and meaning only in connection with definite political situations.

If anyone were to undertake to make the mass strike generally, as a form of proletarian action, the object of methodological agitation, and to go house-to-house canvassing with this "idea" in order to gradually win the working-class to it, it would be as idle and profitless and absurd an occupation as it would be to seek to make the idea of the revolution or of the fight at the barricades the object of a special agitation. The mass strike has now become the centre of the lively interest of the German and the international working-class because it is a new form of struggle, and as such is the sure symptom of a thoroughgoing internal revolution in the relations of the classes and in the conditions of the class struggle. It is a testimony to the sound revolutionary instinct and to the quick intelligence of the mass of the German proletariat that, in spite of the obstinate resistance of their trade-union leaders, they are applying themselves to this new problem with such keen interest.

But it does not meet the case, in the presence of this interest and of this fine, intellectual thirst and desire for revolutionary deeds on the part of the workers, to treat them to abstract mental gymnastics on the possibility or impossibility of the mass strike; they should be enlightened on the development of the Russian Revolution, the international significance of that revolution, the sharpening of class antagonisms in Western Europe, the wider political perspectives of the class struggle in Germany, and the role and the tasks of the masses in the coming struggles. Only in this form will the discussion on the mass strike lead to the widening of the intellectual horizon of the proletariat, to the sharpening of their way of thinking, and to the steeling of their energy.

Viewed from this standpoint however, the criminal proceedings desired by the enemies of "revolutionary romanticism" appear in all their absurdity, because, in treating of the problem, one does not adhere strictly to the text of the Jena resolution. The "practical politicians" agree to this resolution if need be, because they couple the mass strike chiefly with the fate of universal suffrage, from which it follows that they can believe in two things—first, that the mass strike is of a purely defensive character, and second, that the mass strike is even subordinate to parliamentarism, that is, has been turned into a mere appendage of parliamentarism. But the real kernel of the Jena resolution in this connection is that in the present position of Germany an attempt on the part of the prevailing reaction on the parliamentary vote would in all probability be the moment for the introduction of, and the signal for, a period of stormy political struggles in which the mass strike as a means of struggle in Germany might well come into use for the first time.

But to seek to narrow and to artificially smother the social importance, and to limit the historical scope, of the mass strike as a phenomenon and as a problem of the class struggle by the wording of a congress resolution is an undertaking which for

short-sightedness can only be compared with the veto on discussion of the trade-union congress at Cologne. In the resolution of the Jena Congress, German social democracy has officially taken notice of the fundamental change which the Russian Revolution [of 1905] has effected in the international conditions of the proletarian class struggle, and has announced its capacity for revolutionary development and its power of adaptability to the new demands of the coming phase of the class struggle. Therein lies the significance of the Jena resolution. As for the peaceful application of the mass strike in Germany, history will decide that as it decided it in Russia—history in which German social democracy with its decisions is, it is true, an important factor, but, at the same time, only *one* factor amongst many.

6. Co-operation of Organised and Unorganised Workers Necessary for Victory

In connection with this, the question of organisation in relation to the problem of the mass strike in Germany assumes an essentially different aspect.

The attitude of many trade-union leaders to this question is generally summed up in the assertion: "We are not yet strong enough to risk such a hazardous trial of strength as a mass strike." Now this position is so far untenable that it is an insoluble problem to determine the time, in a peaceful fashion by counting heads, when the proletariat are "strong enough" for any struggle. Thirty years ago the German trade-unions had 50,000 members. That was obviously a number with which a mass strike on the above scale was not to be thought of. Fifteen years later the trade-unions were four times as strong, and counted 237,000 members. If, however, the present trade-union leaders had been asked at the time if the organisation of the proletariat was then sufficiently ripe for a mass strike, they would assuredly have replied that it was still far from it and that the number of those organised in trade-unions would first have to be counted by millions.

Today the number of trade-unionists already runs into the second million, but the views of the leaders are still exactly the same, and may very well be the same to the end. The tacit assumption is that the entire working class of Germany, down to the last man and the last woman, must be included in the organisation before it "is strong enough" to risk a mass action, which then, according to the old formula, would probably be represented as "superfluous." This theory is nevertheless absolutely utopian, for the simple reason that it suffers from an internal contradiction, that it goes in a vicious circle. Before the workers can engage in any direct class struggle they must all be organised. The circumstances, the conditions, of capitalist development and of the bourgeois state make it impossible that, in the normal course of things, without stormy class struggles, certain sections—can be

organised at all. We see even in Britain, which has had a whole century of indefatigable trade-union effort without any "disturbances"—except at the beginning in the period of the Chartist movement—without any "romantic revolutionary" errors or temptations, it has not been possible to do more than organise a minority of the better-paid sections of the proletariat.

On the other hand the trade-unions, like all fighting organisations of the proletariat, cannot permanently maintain themselves in any other way than by struggle, and that not struggles of the same kind as the war between the frogs and the mice in the stagnant waters of the bourgeois parliamentary period, but struggle in the troubled revolutionary periods of the mass strike. The rigid, mechanical-bureaucratic conception cannot conceive of the struggle save as the product of organisation at a certain stage of its strength. On the contrary, the living, dialectical explanation makes the organisation arise as a product of the struggle. We have already seen a grandiose example of this phenomenon in Russia, where a proletariat almost wholly unorganised created a comprehensive network of organisational appendages in a year-and-a-half of stormy revolutionary struggle.

Another example of this kind is furnished by the history of the German unions. In the year 1878 the number of trade-union members amounted to 50,000. According to the theory of the present-day trade-union leaders this organisation, as stated above, was not nearly "strong enough" to enter upon a violent political struggle. The German trade-unions however, weak as they were at the time, did take up the struggle—namely the struggle against the anti-socialist law—and showed that they were "strong enough," not only to emerge victorious from the struggle, but to increase their strength five-fold: in 1891, after the repeal of the anti-socialist laws, their membership was 277,659. It is true that the methods by which the trade-unions conquered in the struggle against the anti-socialist laws do not correspond to the ideal of a peaceful, bee-like, uninterrupted process: they went first into the fight absolutely in ruins, to rise again on the next wave and to be born anew. But this is precisely the specific method of growth corresponding to the proletarian class organisations: to be tested in the struggle and to go forth from the struggle with increased strength.

On a closer examination of German conditions and of the condition of the different sections of the working class, it is clear that the coming period of stormy political mass struggles will not bring the dreaded, threatening downfall of the German trade-unions, but on the contrary, will open up hitherto unsuspected prospects of the extension of their sphere of power—an extension that will proceed rapidly by leaps and bounds. But the question has still another aspect. The plan of undertaking mass strikes as a serious political class action with organised workers only is absolutely hopeless. If the mass strike, or rather, mass strikes, and the mass struggle are to be successful they must become a real *people's movement*, that is,

the widest sections of the proletariat must be drawn into the fight. Already in the parliamentary form the might of the proletarian class struggle rests not on the small, organised group but on the surrounding periphery of the revolutionary-minded proletariat. If the social democrats were to enter the electoral battle with their few hundred thousand organised members alone, they would condemn themselves to futility. And although it is the tendency of social democracy wherever possible to draw the whole great army of its voters into the party organisation, its mass of voters after thirty years experience of social democracy is not increased through the growth of the party organisation, but on the contrary, the new sections of the proletariat, won for the time being through the electoral struggle, are the fertile soil for the subsequent seed of organisation. Here the organisation does not supply the troops of the struggle, but the struggle, in an ever growing degree, supplies recruits for the organisation.

In a much greater degree does this obviously apply to direct political mass action than to the parliamentary struggle. If the social democrats, as the organised nucleus of the working class, are the most important vanguard of the entire body of the workers and if the political clarity, the strength, and the unity of the labour movement flow from this organisation, then it is not permissible to visualise the class movement of the proletariat as a movement of the organised minority. Every real, great class struggle must rest upon the support and co-operation of the widest masses, and a strategy of class struggle which does not reckon with this co-operation, which is based upon the idea of the finely stage-managed march out of the small, well-trained part of the proletariat is foredoomed to be a miserable fiasco.

Mass strikes and political mass struggles cannot, therefore, possibly be carried through in Germany by the organised workers alone, nor can they be appraised by regular "direction" from the central committee of a party. In this case, again—exactly as in Russia—they depend not so much upon "discipline" and "training" and upon the most careful possible regulation beforehand of the questions of support and cost, as upon a real revolutionary, determined class action, which will be able to win and draw into the struggle the widest circles of the unorganised workers, according to their mood and their conditions.

The overestimate and the false estimate of the role of organisations in the class struggle of the proletariat is generally reinforced by the underestimate of the unorganised proletarian mass and of their political maturity. In a revolutionary period, in the storm of great unsettling class struggles, the whole educational effect of the rapid capitalist development and of social democratic influences first shows itself upon the widest sections of the people, of which, in peaceful times the tables of the organised, and even election statistics, give only a faint idea.

We have seen that in Russia, in about two years a great general action of the proletariat can forthwith arise from the smallest partial conflict of the workers with the employers, from the most insignificant act of brutality of the government organs. Everyone, of course, sees and believes that, because in Russia "the revolution" is there. But what does that mean? It means that class feeling, the class instinct, is alive and very active in the Russian proletariat, so that immediately they regard every partial question of any small group of workers as a general question, as a class affair, and quick as lightening they react to its influence as a unity. While in Germany, France, Italy and Holland the most violent trade-union conflicts call forth hardly any general action of the working class—and when they do, only the organised part of the workers move—in Russia the smallest dispute raises a storm. That means nothing else however, than that at present—paradoxical as it may sound—the class instinct of the youngest, least trained, badly educated and still worse organised Russian proletariat is immeasurably stronger than that of the organised, trained and enlightened working class of Germany or of any other west European country. And that is not to be reckoned a special virtue of the "young, unexhausted East" as compared with the "sluggish West," but is simply a result of direct revolutionary mass action.

In the case of the enlightened German worker the class consciousness implanted by the social democrats is *theoretical and latent*: in the period ruled by bourgeois parliamentarism it cannot, as a rule, actively participate in a direct mass action; it is the ideal sum of the four hundred parallel actions of the electoral sphere during the election struggle, of the many partial economic strikes and the like. In the revolution when the masses themselves appear upon the political battlefield this class-consciousness becomes *practical and active*. A year of revolution has therefore given the Russian proletariat that "training" which thirty years of parliamentary and trade-union struggle cannot artificially give to the German proletariat. Of course, this living, active class feeling of the proletariat will considerably diminish in intensity, or rather change into a concealed and latent condition, after the close of the period of revolution and the erection of a bourgeois-parliamentary constitutional state.

And just as surely, on the other hand, will the living revolutionary class feeling, capable of action, affect the widest and deepest layers of the proletariat in Germany in a period of strong political engagement, and that the more rapidly and more deeply, more energetically the educational work of social democracy is carried on amongst them. This educational work and the provocative and revolutionising effect of the whole present policy of Germany will express itself in the circumstances that all those groups which present in their apparent political stupidity remain insensitive to all the organising attempts of the social democrats and of the trade unions will suddenly follow the flag of social democracy in a serious revolutionary period. Six months of a revolutionary period will complete the work

of the training of these as yet unorganised masses which ten years of public demonstrations and distribution of leaflets would be unable to do. And when conditions in Germany have reached the critical stage for such a period, the sections which are today unorganised and backward will, in the struggle, prove themselves the most radical, the most impetuous element, and not one that will have to be dragged along. If it should come to mass strikes in Germany it will almost certainly not be the best organised workers—and most certainly not the printers—who will develop the greatest capacity for action, but the worst organised or totally unorganised—the miners, the textile workers, and perhaps even the land workers.

In this way we arrive at the same conclusions in Germany in relation to the peculiar tasks of *direction* in relation to the role of social democracy in mass strikes, as in our analysis of events in Russia. If we now leave the pedantic scheme of demonstrative mass strikes artificially brought about by order of parties and trade unions, and turn to the living picture of a peoples' movement arising with elementary energy, from the culmination of class antagonisms and the political situation—a movement which passes, politically as well as economically, into mass struggles and mass strikes—it becomes obvious that the task of social democracy does not consist in the technical preparation and direction of mass strikes, but, first and foremost, in the *political leadership* of the whole movement.

The social democrats are the most enlightened, most class-conscious vanguard of the proletariat. They cannot and dare not wait, in a fatalist fashion, with folded arms for the advent of the "revolutionary situation," to wait for that which in every spontaneous peoples' movement, falls from the clouds. On the contrary, they must now, as always, hasten the development of things and endeavour to accelerate events. This they cannot do, however, by suddenly issuing the "slogan" for a mass strike at random at any odd moment, but first and foremost, by making clear to the widest layers of the proletariat the *inevitable advent* of this revolutionary period, the inner *social factors* making for it and the *political consequences* of it. If the widest proletarian layer should be won for a political mass action of the social democrats, and if, vice versa, the social democrats should seize and maintain the real leadership of a mass movement—should they become, in a *political sense*, the rulers of the whole movement, then they must, with the utmost clearness, consistency and resoluteness, inform the German proletariat of their tactics and aims in the period of coming struggle.

7. The Role of the Mass Strike in the Revolution

We have seen that the mass strike in Russia does not represent an artificial product of premeditated tactics on the part of the social democrats, but a natural historical

phenomenon on the basis of the present revolution. Now what are the factors which in Russia have brought forth this new phenomenal form of the revolution?

The Russian revolution has for first task the abolition of absolutism and the establishment of a modern bourgeois-parliamentary constitutional state. It is exactly the same in form as that which confronted Germany in the March 1848 Revolution, and the Great French Revolution of the end of the eighteenth century. But the condition, the historical milieu, in which these formally analogous revolutions took place, are fundamentally different from those of present-day Russia. The essential difference is that between those bourgeois revolutions in the West, and the current bourgeois revolution in the East, the whole cycle of capitalist development has run its course. And this development had seized not only the West European countries, but also absolutist Russia. Large-scale industry with all its consequences – modern class divisions, acute social contrasts, modern life in large cities and the modern proletariat – has become in Russia the prevailing form, that is, in social development the decisive form of production.

The remarkable, contradictory, historical situation results from this that the bourgeois revolution, in accordance with its formal tasks will, in the first place, be carried out by a modern class-conscious proletariat, and in an international milieu whose distinguishing characteristic is the ruin of bourgeois democracy. It is not the bourgeoisie that is now the driving force of revolution as in the earlier revolutions of the West, while the proletarian masses, swamped amidst a petty-bourgeois mass, simply furnish cannon-fodder for the bourgeoisie, but on the contrary, it is the class-conscious proletariat that is the active and leading element, while the big bourgeois turns out to be either openly against the revolution or liberal moderates, and only the rural petit-bourgeoisie and the urban petit-bourgeois intelligentsia are definitively oppositional and even revolutionary minded.

The Russian proletariat, however, who are destined to play the leading part in the bourgeois revolution, enter the fight free from all illusions of bourgeois democracy, with a strongly developed consciousness of their own specific class interests, and at a time when the antagonism between capital and labour has reached its height. This contradictory situation finds expression in the fact that in this formally bourgeois revolution, the antagonism of bourgeois society to absolutism is governed by the antagonism of the proletariat to bourgeois society, that the struggle of the proletariat to bourgeois society is directed simultaneously and with equal energy against both absolutism and capitalist exploitation, and that the programme of the revolutionary struggle concentrates with equal emphasis on political freedom, the winning of the eight-hour day, and a human standard of material existence for the proletariat. This two-fold character of the Russian Revolution is expressed in that close union of the economic with the political

struggle and in their mutual interaction which we have seen is a feature of the Russian events and which finds its appropriate expression in the mass strike.

In the earlier bourgeois revolution where, on the one hand, the political training and the leadership of the revolutionary masses were undertaken by the bourgeois parties, and where, on the other hand, it was merely a question of overthrowing the old government, the brief battle at the barricades was the appropriate form of the revolutionary struggle. Today the working class must educate itself, marshal its forces, and direct itself in the course of the revolutionary struggle and thus the revolution is directed as much against capitalist exploitation as against the *ancien regime*; so much so that the mass strike appears as the natural means to recruit, organize and prepare the widest proletarian layers for revolutionary struggle, as the means to undermine and overthrow the old state power, as well as to contain the capitalist exploitation. The urban industrial proletariat is now the soul of the revolution in Russia. But in order to carry through a direct political struggle as a mass, the proletariat must first be assembled as a mass, and for this purpose they must come out of the factory and workshop, mine and foundry, must overcome the atomisation and decay to which they are condemned under the daily yoke of capitalism.

The mass strike is the first natural, impulsive form of every great revolutionary struggle of the proletariat and the more highly developed the antagonism is between capital and labour, the more effective and decisive must mass strikes become. The chief form of previous bourgeois revolutions, the fight at the barricades, the open conflict with the armed power of the state, is in the revolution today only the culminating point, only a moment on the process of the proletarian mass struggle. And therewith in the new form of the revolution there is reached that civilising and mitigating of the class struggle which was prophesied by the opportunists of German social democracy – the Bernsteins, Davids, etc. It is true that these men saw the desired civilising and mitigating of the class struggle in the light of petty bourgeois democratic illusions – they believed that the class struggle would shrink to an exclusively parliamentary contest that and that street fighting would simply be done away with. History has found the solution in a deeper and finer fashion: in the advent of revolutionary mass strikes, which, of course, in no way replaces brutal street fights or renders them unnecessary, but which reduces them to a moment in the long period of political struggle, and which at the same time unites with the revolutionary period and enormous cultural work in the most exact sense of the words: the material and intellectual elevation of the whole working class through the “civilising” of the barbaric forms of capitalist exploitation.

The mass strike is thus shown to be not a specifically Russian product, springing from absolutism but a universal form of the proletarian class struggle resulting from the present stage of capitalist development and class relations. From this

standpoint the three bourgeois revolutions – the Great French Revolution, the German Revolution of March, and the present Russian Revolution – form a continuous chain of development in which the fortunes and the end of the capitalist century are to be seen. In the Great French Revolution the still wholly underdeveloped internal contradictions of bourgeois society gave scope for a long period of violent struggles, in which all the antagonisms which first germinated and ripened in the heat of the revolution raged unhindered and unrestrained in a spirit of reckless radicalism. A century later the revolution of the German bourgeoisie, which broke out midway in the development of capitalism, was already hampered on both sides by the antagonism of interests and the equilibrium of strength between capital and labour, and was smothered in a bourgeois-feudal compromise, and shortened to a miserable episode ending in words.

Another half century, and the present Russian Revolution stands at a point of the historical path which is already over the summit, which is on the other side of the culminating point of capitalist society, at which the bourgeois revolutions cannot again be smothered by the antagonism between bourgeoisie and proletariat, but, will, on the contrary, expand into a new lengthy period of violent social struggles, at which the balancing of the account with absolutism appears a trifle in comparison with the many new accounts which the revolution itself opens up. The present revolution realises in the particular affairs of absolutist Russia the general results of international capitalist development, and appears not so much as the last successor of the old bourgeois revolutions as the forerunner of the new series of proletarian revolutions of the West. The most backward country of all, just because it has been so unpardonably late with its bourgeois revolution, shows ways and methods of further class struggle to the proletariat of Germany and the most advanced capitalist countries.

Accordingly it appears, when looked at in this way, to be entirely wrong to regard the Russian Revolution as a grandiose spectacle, as something specifically “Russian,” and at best to admire the heroism of the fighting men, that is, as outside onlookers of the struggle. It is much more important that the German workers should learn to look upon the Russian Revolution *as their own affair*, not merely as a matter of international solidarity with the Russian proletariat, but first and foremost, as a *chapter of their own social and political history*. Those trade-union leaders and parliamentarians who regard the German proletariat as “too weak” and German conditions “as not ripe enough” for revolutionary mass struggles, have obviously not the least idea that the measure of the degree of ripeness of class relations in Germany and of the power of the proletariat does not lie in the statistics of German trade unionism or in election figures, but – in the events of the Russian Revolution. Exactly as the ripeness of French class antagonisms under the July monarchy and the June battle of Paris was reflected in the German March Revolution, in its course and its fiasco, so today the ripeness of German class

antagonisms is reflected in the events and in the power of the Russian Revolution. And while the bureaucrats of the German labour movement rummage in their office drawers for information as to their strength and maturity, they do not see that that for which they seek is lying before their eyes in a great historical revolution, because, historically considered, the Russian Revolution is a reflex of the power and the maturity of the international, and therefore in the first place, of the German labour movement.

It would therefore be a too pitiable and grotesquely insignificant result of the Russian Revolution if the German proletariat should merely draw from it the lesson – as is desired by Comrades Frohme, Elm, and others – of using the extreme form of the struggle, the mass strike, and so weaken themselves as to be merely a reserve force in the event of the withdrawal of the parliamentary vote, and therefore a passive means of parliamentary defensive. When the parliamentary vote is taken from us there we will not resist. That is a self-evident decision. But for this it is not necessary to adopt the heroic pose of a Danton as was done, for example, by Comrade Elm in Jena; because the defence of the modest measure of parliamentary right already possessed is less a Heaven-storming innovation, for which the frightful hecatombs of the Russian Revolution were first necessary as a means of encouragement, than the simplest and first duty of every opposition party. But the mere defensive can never exhaust the policy of the proletariat, in a period of revolution. And if it is, on the one hand, difficult to predict with any degree of certainty whether the destruction of universal suffrage would cause a situation in Germany which would call forth an immediate mass strike action, so on the other hand, it is absolutely certain that when we in Germany enter upon the period of stormy mass actions, it will be impossible for the social democrats to base their tactics upon a mere parliamentary defensive.

To fix beforehand the cause and the moment from and in which the mass strikes in Germany will break out is not in the power of social democracy, because it is not in its power to bring about historical situations by resolutions at party congresses. But what it can and must do is to make clear the political tendencies, when they once appear, and to formulate them as resolute and consistent tactics. Man cannot keep historical events in check while making recipes for them, but he can see in advance their apparent calculable consequences and arrange his mode of action accordingly.

The first threatening political danger with which the German proletariat have concerned themselves for a number of years is a coup d'état of the reaction which will wrest from the wide masses of the people of the most important political right – universal suffrage. In spite of the immense importance of this possible event, it is, as we have already said, impossible to assert with certainty that an open popular movement would immediately break out after the coup d'état, because today innumerable circumstances and factors have to be taken into account. But when we

consider the present extreme acuteness of conditions in Germany, and on the other hand, the manifold international reactions of the Russian Revolution and of the future rejuvenated Russia, it is clear that the collapse of German politics which would ensue from the repeal of universal suffrage could not alone call a halt to the struggle for this right. This coup d'état would rather draw after it, in a longer or shorter period and with elementary power, a great general political reckoning of the insurgent and awakened mass of the people – a reckoning with bread usury, with artificially caused dearness of meat, with expenditure on a boundless militarism and “navalism,” with the corruption of colonial policy, with the national disgrace of the Königsberg trial, with the cessation of social reform, with the discharging of railway workers, the postal officials and the land workers, with the tricking and mocking of the miners, with the judgement of Lobtau and the whole system of class justice, with the brutal lockout system – in short, with the whole thirty-year-old oppression of the combined dominion of Junkerdom and large trustified capital.

But if once the ball is set rolling then social democracy, whether it wills it or not, can never again bring it to a standstill. The opponents of the mass strike are in the habit of denying that the lessons and examples of the Russian Revolution can be a criterion for Germany because, in the first place, in Russia the great step must first be taken from an Oriental despotism to a modern bourgeois legal order. The formal distance between the old and the new political order is said to be a sufficient explanation of the vehemence and the violence of the revolution in Russia. In Germany we have long had the most necessary forms and guarantees of a constitutional state, from which it follows that such an elementary raging of social antagonisms is impossible here.

Those who speculate thus forget that in Germany when it once comes to the outbreak of open political struggles, even the historically determined goal will be quite different from that in Russia today. Precisely because the bourgeois legal order in Germany has existed for a long time, because therefore it has had time to completely exhaust itself and to draw to an end, because bourgeois democracy and liberalism have had time to die out – because of this there can no longer be any talk of a *bourgeois* revolution in Germany. And therefore in a period of open political popular struggles in Germany, the last historically necessary goal can only be the *dictatorship of the proletariat*. The distance, however, of this task from the present conditions of Germany is still greater than that of the bourgeois legal order from Oriental despotism, and therefore, the task cannot be completed at one stroke, but must similarly be accomplished during a long period of gigantic social struggles.

But is there not a gross contradiction in the picture we have drawn? On the one hand it means that in an eventual future period of political mass action the most backward layers of the German proletariat – the land workers, the railwaymen, and

the postal slaves – will first of all win the right of combination, and that the worst excrescences of exploitation must first be removed and on the other hand, the political task of this period is said to be the conquest of power by the proletariat! On the one hand, economic, trade-union struggles for the most immediate interests, for the material elevation of the working class; on the other hand the ultimate goal of social democracy! Certainly these are great contradictions, but they are not contradictions due to our reasoning, but contradictions due to capitalist development. It does not proceed in a beautiful straight line but in a lightning-like zig-zag. Just as the various capitalist countries represent the most varied stages of development, so within each country the different layers of the same working class are represented. But history does not wait patiently till the backward countries, and the most advanced layers have joined together so that the whole mass can move symmetrically forward like a compact column. It brings the best prepared parts to explosion as soon as conditions there are ripe for it, and then in the storm of the revolutionary period, lost ground is recovered, unequal things are equalised, and the whole pace of social progress changed at one stroke to the double-quick.

Just as in the Russian Revolution all the grades of development and all the interests of the different layers of workers are united in the social democratic programme of the revolution, and the innumerable partial struggles united in the great common class action of the proletariat, so will it also be in Germany when the conditions are ripe for it. And the task of social democracy will then be to regulate its tactics, not by the most backward phases of development but by the most advanced.

8. Need for United Action of Trade Unions and Social Democracy

The most important desideratum which is to be hoped for from the German working class in the period of great struggles which will come sooner or later is, after complete resoluteness and consistency of tactics, the utmost capacity for action, and therefore the utmost possible unity of the leading social democratic part of the proletarian masses. Meanwhile the first weak attempts at the preparation of great mass actions have discovered a serious drawback in this connection: the total separation and independence of the two organisations of the labour movement, the social democracy and the trade unions.

It is clear on a closer consideration of the mass strikes in Russia as well as of the conditions in Germany itself, that any great mass action, if it is not confined to a mere one-day demonstration, but is intended to be a real fighting action, cannot possibly be thought of as a so-called political mass strike. In such an action in Germany the trade-unions would be implicated as much as the social democrats.

Not because the trade-union leaders imagine that the social democrats, in view of their smaller organisation, would have no other resources than the co-operation of one and a quarter million trade-unionists and without them would be unable to do anything, but because of a much more deep-lying motive: because every direct mass action of the period of open class struggles would be at the same time both political and economic. If in Germany, from any cause and at any time, it should come to great political struggles, to mass strikes, then at that time an era of violent trade-union struggles would begin in Germany, and events would not stop to inquire whether the trade-union leaders had given their consent to the movement or not. Whether they stand aside or endeavour to resist the movement, the result of their attitude will only be that the trade-union leaders, like the party leaders in the analogous case, will simply be swept aside by the rush of events, and the economic and the political struggles of the masses will be fought out without them.

As a matter-of-fact the separation of the political, and the economic struggle and the independence of each, is nothing but an artificial product of the parliamentary period, even if historically determined. On the one hand in the peaceful, "normal" course of bourgeois society, the economic struggle is split into a multitude of individual struggles in every undertaking and dissolved in every branch of production. On the other hand the political struggle is not directed by the masses themselves in a direct action, but in correspondence with the form of the bourgeois state, in a representative fashion, by the presence of legislative representation. As soon as a period of revolutionary struggle commences, that is, as soon as the masses appear on the scene of conflict, the breaking up the economic struggle into many parts, as well as the indirect parliamentary form of the political struggle ceases; in a revolutionary mass action the political struggle ceases; in a revolutionary mass action the political and economic struggle are one, and the artificial boundary between trade union and social democracy as two separate, wholly independent forms of the labour movement, is simply swept away. But what finds concrete expression in the revolutionary mass movement finds expression also in the parliamentary period as an actual state of affairs. There are not two different class struggles of the working class, an economic and a political one, but only *one* class struggle, which aims at one and the same time at the limitation of capitalist exploitation within bourgeois society, and at the abolition of exploitation together with bourgeois society itself.

When these two sides of the class struggle are separated from one another for technical reasons in the parliamentary period, they do not form two parallel concurrent actions, but merely two phases, two stages of the struggle for emancipation of the working class. The trade-union struggle embraces the immediate interests, and the social democratic struggle the future interests, of the labour movement. The communists, says the *Communist Manifesto*, represent, as against various group interests of the proletariat as a whole, and in the various

stages of development of the class struggle, they represent the interests of the whole movement, that is, the ultimate goal – the liberation of the proletariat. The trade unions represent only the group interests and only one stage of development of the labour movement. Social democracy represents the working class and the cause of its liberation as a whole. The relation of the trade unions to social democracy is therefore a part of the whole, and when, amongst the trade-union leaders, the theory of “equal authority” of trade-unions and social democracy finds so much favour, it rests upon a fundamental misconception of the essence of trade-unionism itself and of its role in the general struggle for freedom of the working class.

This theory of the parallel action of social democracy and the trade-unions and of their “equal authority” is nevertheless not altogether without foundation, but has its historical roots. It rests upon the illusion of the peaceful, “normal” period of bourgeois society, in which the political struggle of social democracy appears to be consumed in the parliamentary struggle. The parliamentary struggle, however, the counterpart of the trade-union struggle, is equally with it, a fight conducted exclusively on the basis of the bourgeois social order. It is by its very nature, political reform work, as that of the trade-unions is economic reform work. It represents political work for the present, as trade-unions represent economic work for the present. It is, like them, merely a phase, a stage of development in the complete process of the proletarian class struggle whose ultimate goal is as far beyond the parliamentary struggle as it is beyond the trade-union struggle. The parliamentary struggle is, in relation to social democratic policy, also a part of the whole, exactly as trade-union work is. Social democracy today comprises the parliamentary and the trade-union struggle in one class struggle aiming at the abolition of the bourgeois social order.

The theory of the “equal authority” of trade-unions and social democracy is likewise not a mere theoretical misunderstanding, not a mere case of confusion but an expression of the well-known tendency of that opportunist wing of social democracy which reduced the political struggle of the working class to the parliamentary contest, and desires to change social democracy from a revolutionary proletarian party into a petty-bourgeois reform one. If social democracy should accept the theory of the “equal authority” of the trade-unions, it would thereby accept, indirectly and tacitly, that transformation which has long been striven for by the representatives of the opportunist tendency.

In Germany, however, there is such a shifting of relations within the labour movement as is impossible in any other country. The theoretical conception, according to which the trade-unions are merely a part of social democracy, finds its classic expression in Germany in fact, in actual practice, and that in three directions. First, the German trade-unions are a direct product of social democracy; it was

social democracy which created the beginnings of the present trade-union movement in Germany and which enabled it to attain such great dimensions, and it is social democracy which supplies it to this day with its leaders and the most active promoters of its organisation.

Second, the German trade-unions are a product of social democracy also in the sense that social democratic teaching in the soul of trade-union practice, as the trade-unions owe their superiority over all bourgeois and denominational trade-unions to the idea of the class struggle; their practical success, their power, is a result of the circumstance that their practice is illuminated by the theory of scientific socialism and they are thereby raised above the level of a narrow-minded socialism. The strength of the “practical policy” of the German trade-unions lies in their insight into the deeper social and economic connections of the capitalist system; but they owe this insight entirely to the theory of scientific socialism upon which their practice is based. Viewed in this way, any attempt to emancipate the trade-unions from the social democratic theory in favour of some other “trade-union theory” opposed to social democracy, is, from the standpoint of the trade-unions themselves and of their future, nothing but an attempt to commit suicide. The separation of trade-union practice from the theory of scientific socialism would mean to the German trade-unions the immediate loss of all their superiority over all kinds of bourgeois trade-unions, and their fall from their present height to the level of unsteady groping and mere dull empiricism.

Thirdly and finally, the trade-unions are, although their leaders have gradually lost sight of the fact, even as regards their numerical strength, a direct product of the social democratic movement and the social democratic agitation. It is true that in many districts trade-union agitation precedes social democratic agitation, and that everywhere trade-union work prepares the way for party work. From the point of view of effect, party and trade-unions assist each other to the fullest extent. But when the picture of the class struggle in Germany is looked at as a whole and its more deep-seated associations, the proportions are considerably altered. Many trade-union leaders are in the habit of looking down triumphantly from the proud height of their membership of one and a quarter million on the miserable organised members of the Social Democratic Party, not yet half a million strong, and of recalling the time, ten or twelve years ago, when those in the ranks of social democracy were pessimistic as to the prospects of trade-union development.

They do see that between these two things – the large number of organised trade unionists and the small number of organised Social Democrats – *there exists in a certain degree a direct causal connection*. Thousands and thousands of workers do not join the party organisations precisely because they join the trade-unions. According to the theory, all the workers must be doubly organised, must attend two kinds of meetings, pay double contributions, read two kinds of workers’ papers, etc.

But for this it is necessary to have a higher standard of intelligence and of that idealism which, from a pure feeling of duty to the labour movement, is prepared for the daily sacrifice of time and money, and finally, a higher standard of that passionate interest in the actual life of the party which can only be engendered by membership of the party organisation. All this is true of the most enlightened and intelligent minority of social democratic workers in the large towns, where party life is full and attractive and where the workers' standard of living is high. Amongst the wider sections of the working masses in the large towns, however, as well as in the provinces, in the smaller and the smallest towns where political life is not an independent thing but a mere reflex of the course of events in the capital, where consequently, party life is poor and monotonous, and where, finally, the economic standard of life of the workers is, for the most part, miserable, it is very difficult to secure the double form of organisation.

For the social democratically-minded worker from the masses the question will be solved by his joining his trade-union. The immediate interests of his economic struggle which are conditioned by the nature of the struggle itself cannot be advanced in any other way than by membership of a trade-union organisation. The contribution which he pays, often amidst considerable sacrifice of his standard of living, bring him immediate, visible results. His social democratic inclinations, however, enable him to participate in various kinds of work without belonging to a special party organisation; by voting at parliamentary elections, by attendance at social democratic public meetings, by following the reports of social democratic speeches in representatives bodies, and by reading the party press. Compare in this connection the number of social democratic electors or the number of subscribers to *Vorwärts* with the number of organised party members in Berlin!

And what is most decisive, the social democratically-minded average worker who, as a simple man, can have no understanding of the intricate and fine so-called two-soul theory, feels that he is, even in the trade union, *social democratically* organised. Although the central committees of the unions have no official party label, the workman from the masses in every city and town sees the head of his trade-union as the most active leader, those colleagues whom he knows also as comrades and social democrats in public life, now as Reichstag, Landtag or local representatives, now as trusted men of the social democracy, members of election committees, party editors and secretaries, or merely as speakers and agitators. Further, he hears expressed in the agitational work of his trade-union much the same ideas, pleasing and intelligible to him, of capitalist exploitation, class relations, etc., as those that have come to him from social democratic agitation. Indeed, the most and best loved of the speakers at trade-union meetings are those same social democrats.

Thus everything combines to give the average class-conscious worker the feeling that he, in being organised in his trade-union, is also a member of his labour party and is social democratically organised, *and therein lies the peculiar recruiting strength of the German trade-unions*. Not because of the appearance of neutrality, but because of the social democratic reality of their being, have the central unions being enabled to attain their present strength. This is simply through the co-existence of the various unions – Catholic, Hirsch-Dunker, etc. – founded by bourgeois parties by which it was sought to establish the necessity for that political “neutrality.” When the German worker who has full freedom of choice to attach himself to a Christian, Catholic, Evangelical or Free-thinking trade-union, chooses none of these but the “free trade-union” instead, or leaves one of the former to join the latter, he does so only because he considers that the central unions are the avowed organisations of the modern class struggle, or, what is the same thing in Germany, that they are social democratic trade-unions.

In a word the appearance of “neutrality,” which exists in the minds of many trade-union leaders, does not exist for the mass of organised trade-unionists. And that is the good fortune of the trade-union movement. If the appearance of “neutrality” that alienation and separation of the trade-unions from social democracy, really and truly becomes a reality in the eyes of the proletarian masses, then the trade-unions would immediately lose all their advantages over competing bourgeois unions, and therewith their recruiting power, their living fire. This is conclusively proved by the facts which are generally known. The appearance of party-political “neutrality” of the trade-unions could, as a means of attraction, render inestimable service in a country in which social democracy itself has no credit among the masses, in which the odium attaching a workers’ organisation injures it in the eyes of the masses rather than advantages it – where, in a word, the trade-unions must first of all recruit their troops from a wholly unenlightened, bourgeois-minded mass.

The best example of such a country was, throughout the whole of the last century, and is to a certain extent today, Great Britain. In Germany, however, party relations are altogether different. In a country, in which social democracy is the most powerful political party, in which its recruiting power is represented by an army of over three million proletarians, it is ridiculous to speak of the deterrent effect of social democracy and of the necessity for a fighting organisation of the workers to ensure political neutrality. The mere comparison of the figures of social democratic voters with the figures of the trade-union organisations in Germany is sufficient to prove to the most simple-minded that the trade-unions in Germany do not, as in England, draw their troops from the unenlightened bourgeois-minded mass, but from the mass of proletarians already aroused by the social democracy and won by it to the idea of the class struggle. Many trade-union leaders indignantly reject the idea – a requisite of the “theory of neutrality” – and regard the trade-unions as a

recruiting school for social democracy. This apparently insulting, but in reality, highly flattering presumption is in Germany reduced to mere fancy by the circumstance that the positions are reversed; it is the social democracy which is the recruiting school for the trade-unions.

Moreover, if the organisational work of the trade-unions is for the most part of a very difficult and troublesome kind, it is, with the exception of a few cases and some districts, not merely because on the whole, the soil has not been prepared by the social democratic plough, but also because the trade-union seed itself, and the sower as well, must also be “red,” social democratic before the harvest can prosper. But when we compare in this way the figures of trade-union strength, not with those of the social democratic organisations, but – which is the only correct way – with those of the mass of social democratic voters, we come to a conclusion which differs considerably from the current view of the matter. The fact then comes to light that the “free trade-unions” actually represent today but a minority of the class-conscious workers of Germany, that even with their one and a quarter million organised members they have not yet been able to draw into their ranks one-half of those already aroused by social democracy.

The most important conclusion to be drawn from the facts above cited is that the *complete unity* of the trade-union and the social democratic movements, which is absolutely necessary for the coming mass struggles in Germany, *is actually here*, and that it is incorporated in the wide mass which forms the basis at once of social democracy and trade-unionism, and in whole consciousness both parts of the movement are mingled in a mental unity. The alleged antagonism between social democracy and trade-union officials, which is, however, at the same time an antagonism within the trade-unions between this part of the trade-union leaders and the proletarian mass organised in trade-unions.

The rapid growth of trade-union movement in Germany in the course of the last fifteen years, especially in the period of great economic prosperity from 1895 to 1900 has brought with it a great independence of the trade-unions, a specialising of their methods of struggle, and finally the introduction of a regular trade-union officialdom. All these phenomena are quite understandable and natural historical products of the growth of the trade-unions in this fifteen-year period, and of the economic prosperity and political calm of Germany. They are, although inseparable from certain drawbacks, without doubt a historically necessary evil. But the dialectics of development also brings with it the circumstance that these necessary means of promoting trade-union growth become, on the contrary, obstacles to this further development at a certain stage of organisation and at a certain degree of ripeness of conditions.

The specialisation of professional activity as trade-union leaders, as well as the naturally restricted horizon which is bound up with disconnected economic

struggles in a peaceful period, leads only too easily, amongst trade-union officials, to bureaucratism and a certain narrowness of outlook. Both, however, express themselves in a whole series of tendencies which may be fateful in the highest degree for the future of the trade-union movement. There is first of all the overvaluation of the organisation, which from a means has gradually been changed into an end in itself, a precious thing, to which the interests of the struggles should be subordinated. From this also comes that openly admitted need for peace which shrinks from great risks and presumed dangers to the stability of the trade-unions, and further, the overvaluation of the trade-union method of struggle itself, its prospects and its successes.

The trade-union leaders, constantly absorbed in the economic guerrilla war whose plausible task it is to make the workers place the highest value on the smallest economic achievement, every increase in wages and shortening of the working day, gradually lose the power of seeing the larger connections and of taking a survey of the whole position. Only in this way can one explain why many trade-union leaders refer with the greatest satisfaction to the achievements of the last fifteen years, instead of, on the contrary, emphasising the other side of the medal; the simultaneous and immense reduction of the proletarian standard of life by land usury, by the whole tax and customs policy, by landlord rapacity which has increased house rents to such an exorbitant extent, in short, by all the objective tendencies of bourgeois policy which have largely neutralised the advantages of the fifteen years of trade-union struggle. From the *whole* social democratic truth which, while emphasising the importance of the present work and its absolute necessity, attaches the chief importance to the criticism and the limits to this work, the *half* trade-union truth is taken which emphasises only the positive side of the daily struggle.

And finally, from the concealment of the objective limits drawn by the bourgeois social order to the trade-union struggle, there arises a hostility to every theoretical criticism which refers to these limits in connection with the ultimate aims of the labour movement. Fulsome flattery and boundless optimism are considered to be the duty of every "friend of the trade-union movement." But as the social democratic standpoint consists precisely in fighting against uncritical parliamentary optimism, a front is at last made against the social democratic theory: men grope for a "new trade-union theory," that is, a theory which would open an illimitable vista of economic progress to the trade-union struggle within the capitalist system, in opposition to the social democratic doctrine. Such a theory has indeed existed for some time – the theory of Professor Sombart which was promulgated with the express intention of driving a wedge between the trade-unions and the social democracy in Germany, and of enticing the trade-unions over to the bourgeois position.

In close connection with these theoretical tendencies is a revolution of leaders and rank-and-file. In place of the direction by colleagues through local committees, with their admitted inadequacy, there appears the business-like direction of the trade-union officials. The initiative and the power of making decisions thereby devolve upon trade-union specialists, so to speak, and the more passive virtue of discipline upon the mass of members. This dark side of officialdom also assuredly conceals considerable dangers for the party, as from the latest innovation, the institution of local party secretaries, it can quite easily result, if the social democratic mass is not careful that these secretariats may remain mere organs for carrying out decisions and not be regarded in any way the appointed bearers of the initiative and of the direction of local party life. But by the nature of the case, by the character of the political struggle, there are narrow bounds drawn to bureaucratism in social democracy as in trade-union life.

But here the technical specialising of wage struggles as, for example, the conclusion of intricate tariff agreements and for the like, frequently means that the mass of organised workers are prohibited from taking a “survey of the whole industrial life,” and their incapacity for taking decisions is thereby established. A consequence of this conception is the argument with which every theoretical criticism of the prospects and possibilities of trade-union practice is tabooed and which alleges that it represents a danger to the pious trade-union sentiment of the masses. From this, a point of view has been developed, that it is only by blind, child-like faith in the efficacy of the trade-union struggle that the working masses can be won and held for the organisation. In contradistinction to social democracy which bases its influence on the unity of the masses amidst the contradictions of the existing order and in the complicated character of its development, and on the critical attitude of the masses to all factors and stages of their own class struggle, the influence and the power of the trade-unions are founded upon the upside-down theory of the incapacity of the masses for criticism and decision. “The faith of the people must be maintained” – that is the fundamental principle, acting upon which many trade-union officials stamp as attempts on the life of this movement, all criticisms of the objective inadequacy of trade-unionism.

And finally, a result of all this specialisation and this bureaucratism amongst trade-union officials is the great independence and the “neutrality” of the trade-unions in relation to social democracy. The extreme independence of the trade-union organisation is a natural result of its growth, as a relation which has grown out of the technical division of work between the political and the trade-union forms of struggle. The “neutrality” of the German trade-unions, on its part, arose as a product of the reactionary trade-union legislation of the Prusso-German police state. With time, both aspects of their nature have altered. From the condition of political “neutrality” of the trade-unions imposed by the police, a theory of their voluntary neutrality has been evolved as a necessity founded upon the alleged

nature of the trade-union struggle itself. And the technical independence of the trade-unions which should rest upon the division of work in the unified social democratic class struggle, the separation of the trade-unions from social democracy, from its views and its leadership, has been changed into the so-called equal authority of trade-unions and social democracy.

The appearance of separation and equality of trade-unions and social democracy is, however, incorporated chiefly in the trade-union *officials*, and strengthened through the managing apparatus of the trade-unions. Outwardly, by the co-existence of a complete staff of trade-union officials, of a wholly independent central committee, of numerous professional press, and finally of a trade-union congress, the illusion is created of an exact parallel with the managing apparatus of the social democracy, the party executive, the party press and the party conference. This illusion of equality between social democracy and the trade-union had led to, amongst other things, the monstrous spectacle that, in part, quite analogous agendas are discussed at social democratic conferences and trade-union congresses, and that on the same questions different, and even diametrically opposite, decisions are taken. From the natural division of work between the party conference (which represents the general interests and tasks of the labour movement), and the trade-union congress (which deals with the much narrower sphere of social questions and interests) the artificial division has been made of a pretended trade-union and a social democratic outlook in relation to *the same* general questions and interests of the labour movement.

Thus the peculiar position has arisen that this same trade-union movement which below, in the wide proletarian masses, is absolutely one with social democracy, parts abruptly from it above, in the super-structure of management, and sets itself up as an independent great power. The German labour movement therefore assumes the peculiar form of a double pyramid whose base and body consist of one solid mass but whose apexes are wide apart.

It is clear from this presentation of the case in what way alone in a natural and successful manner that compact unity of the German labour movement can be attained which, in view of the coming political class struggles and of the peculiar interests of the further development of the trade-unions, is indispensably necessary. Nothing could be more perverse or more hopeless than to desire to attain the unity desired by means of sporadic and periodical negotiations on individual questions affecting the labour movement between the Social Democratic Party leadership the trade-union central committees. It is just the highest circles of both forms of the labour movement, which as we have seen, incorporate their separation and self-sufficiency, which are themselves, therefore, the promoters of the illusion of the "equal authority" and of the parallel existence of social democracy and trade-unionism.

To desire the unity of these through the union of the party executive and the general commission is to desire to build a bridge at the very spot where the distance is greater and the crossing more difficult. Not above, amongst the heads of the leading directing organisations and in their federative alliance, but below, amongst the organised proletarian masses, lies the guarantee of the real unity of the labour movement. In the consciousness of the million trade-unionists, the party and the trade unions are actually *one*, they represent in different forms the *social democratic* struggle for the emancipation of the proletariat. And the necessity automatically arises therefrom of removing any causes of friction which have arisen between the social democracy and a part of the trade unions, of adapting their mutual relation to the consciousness of the proletarian masses, that is, *of re-joining the trade-unions to social democracy*. The synthesis of the real development which led from the original incorporation of the trade-unions to their separation from social democracy will thereby be expressed, and the way will be peppered for the coming period of great proletarian mass struggles during the period of vigorous growth, of both trade-unions and social democracy and their reunion, in the interests of both, will become a necessity.

It is not, of course, a question of the merging of the trade-union organisation in the party, but of the restoration of the unity of social democracy and the trade-unions which corresponds to the actual relation between the labour movement as a whole and its partial trade-union expression. Such a revolution will inevitably call forth a vigorous opposition from a part of the trade-union leadership. But it is high time for the working masses of social democracy to learn how to express their capacity for decision and action, and therewith to demonstrate their ripeness for that time of great struggles and great tasks in which they, the masses, will be the actual chorus and the directing bodies will merely act the “speaking parts,” that is, will only be the interpreters of the will of the masses.

The trade-union movement is not that which is reflected in the quite understandable *but irrational* illusion of a minority of the trade-union leaders, but that which lives in the consciousness of the mass of proletarians who have been won for the class struggle. In this consciousness the trade-union movement is part of social democracy. “And what it is, that should it dare to appear.”

From: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1906/mass-strike/index.htm>

Course: The Classics

21082, Luxemburg, The Mass Strike, Compilation, 1906

13907 words